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Christoph Willibald von Gluck
From the painting by Greuze

THE KNIGHT OF THE GOLDEN SPURS

PEOPLE not long ago were celebrating the bi-centenary of Gluck. There was reason for rejoicing, for, in spite of the calumnies and injustices which he suffered here, Gluck manifested for our country a sympathy which never flagged. Besides, and it is this for which we should be grateful to him, he was the first to understand and to demonstrate, in an epoch given over to Italianism, that our own tongue—as good as and perhaps better than any other—is qualified to express the emotions of the soul, its sentiment, its passions.

The merit of Gluck is no longer contested; every one is agreed, or nearly so, as to his high qualities and his value. They have made themselves felt, as does everything superior, real, and sincere. Besides, Fame, contrary to its custom towards many artists, particularly towards the best, did not wait until after his death to honor him. He was able to enjoy its sweetness. Fortune came to him while he could still delight in it, and if all did not admire, at the very first, the reforms that he accomplished, all at least knew him to be of those to be recognized and reckoned with.

His life is an example of energy. He was built for stress and struggle. "He was," says one of his biographers, "a rough, vigorous, heavy man, a peasant of the Danube, and at the same time a powerful and authoritative nobleman."

He had the patience of the strong and a courage which trials could not subdue. He put, as Byron counselled, "spurs to his destiny." An indefatigable worker, of a tireless activity, he took little ac-

count of the flight of years, being certain of attaining his end, employing the time during which he was not producing in accumulating knowledge, in perfecting his intellect, and in enriching his spirit.

If you examine his portraits, or his bust by Houdon, he appears ugly at first. Smallpox had scarred his face frightfully. It could not, however, diminish its expressiveness; it could not, in spite of the thickened, seamed eyelids, extinguish the keenness of his glance nor the brilliance of his sparkling gray eyes; it could not spoil the forehead, with its large prominences on which the high lights played.

As with all innovators, those whose imagination shows them new departures, who will not consent to walk in the steps of their forerunners, who seek to break through conventions and do away with set forms, uncommon determination was necessary to him.

"He who brings a gift," as Gustav Geffroy once said in "*La Vie Artistique*," "has at once as adversaries the ignorantly indifferent and the false thinkers. Through impulse or by design, he is treated either as a knave or a fool. Those who will not take the trouble to understand, or those who foresee a disturbance in their affairs, declare against the newcomer a war of ridicule and of injury, attacking his talent, his person, his existence, preventing his receiving a bit of bread for a masterpiece, forbidding him to live."

Gluck, to tell the truth, never knew privation. He never suffered from hunger; physical distress never added to his mental sufferings. He learned early in

life to be practical and remained so always, never disdaining money, never despising the benefits that his talent brought him, neglecting no opportunity; going, although made rich by his marriage, so far as to traffic in jewels behind the scenes of the theatre, selling to his musicians at an advance objects bought the night before for little money from financially embarrassed artists. We know his remark to Piccini, which was probably only a jest: "You make beautiful music, and are you benefited by it? Believe me, one should think of money-making and nothing else."

These are the lesser sides of his nature. On other sides he equalled Corneille and Shakespeare; he had the marked qualities of his race, and it would not be fair to blame him for not possessing our own light grace, our disinterestedness, our generosity. His rogueries, his smallnesses—are they not obliterated by so many magnificent works, by the tears of Orpheus, by the divine cries of Iphigenia? Do not let us imitate those envious critics who willingly stoop to cast mud.

He was, moreover, faithful in his affections and knew how to love. During more than thirty years, his attachment to his wife never diminished, and he had a warm and paternal fondness—sometimes a little rude, a little brutal, but deep—for her niece, Marianne, a remarkable singer, "a delicate, ethereal creature," according to Madame Suard, whose premature death he never ceased to deplore.

The great object of his existence, his constant preoccupation, was his art. There he showed himself careful to the point of extremism. "While he was composing," M. Jean d'Udine tells us, "he was ceaselessly in correspondence or in conversation with his librettists, continually making them alter their poems,

shorten their text, and causing his musicians to repeat twenty times, thirty times, a difficult passage, until the music and the acting were absolutely perfect.

He was born at Weidenwang, in the Upper-Palatinate. His father, who was gamekeeper to the Prince of Kaunitz, after having served in the armies of Prince Eugene as a soldier in the ranks, brought him, at the age of three years, to the northern part of Bohemia. The first sounds heard by the child were the rustling of the leaves or the howling of tempests through the stripped winter forests.

The old soldier, toughened in the fire of battle, found it natural to bring up his son as he himself had been brought up, without petting and without caresses. Long walks in the wood-paths hardened him against fatigue, the high air strengthened his lungs, the free country life made his spirit sound. During entire days he lost himself in the forests, where he must more than once have made the moss or the ferns his pillow. Without his consciousness, the great poetic quality of the country entered into him, penetrated his spirit and vitalized it. The harmony of the leaves singing in the summer breeze, the wild horror of the December tempests, the stirring melancholy of the moonlight were never effaced from his memory. He remembered them when he wrote "Orpheus" and "Iphigenia."

Germany is a country of music. Its inhabitants make of it their recreation. Christopher, following the custom, practised on the violin and the violoncello. At Kommotou, in the Jesuit college where he had been placed, he devoted himself not only to classical study but to the organ and the harpsichord.

Upon leaving college he went to Prague, and, as his resources were very slender, he was obliged to seek a means of earning his living. His musical knowledge

served him. He became precentor and travelling musician, going from church to church, leading a life of adventure, which does not seem to have been hard for him, and receiving his pay in eggs, which he exchanged with innkeepers or dealers in provisions.

He stood, valiantly, inconveniences to which many others would have succumbed. But he had faith in himself; he walked, as if guided by a star, towards the future—towards a light visible only to him.

The princes of Lobkowitz, his father's employers, showed their goodwill towards him, and, struck by his promise of talent, introduced him to a society of celebrated artists, forgotten to-day, who at that time were the ornament of the court of Charles VI. He learned from them the rules of composition, of which he had up to that time been ignorant, and was presented to Count Melzi, association with whom was to be of great value to him.

Rome, Venice, Naples, and Milan were the artistic centers of Italy. The Count took him there in his suite, and Gluck profited so well by his sojourn that four years later he presented, with considerable success, an opera taken from a poem of Metastasio, and which was the first putting forth of this furious production, which lasted eighteen years, in the course of which, notwithstanding a vagabond existence, he published forty-five scores. They would not have sufficed to transmit his name to posterity, though in each one we can feel his power and intellectual vigor. He perfected himself, at the same time, in the study of foreign tongues: of French, which had for him a particular attraction, of Latin, and of Greek, interesting himself further in the classics of antiquity, which influenced him all the rest of his life and from which his tal-

ent drew its noble quality and its tragic terror.

The Pope was interested in his works and, as a testimonial of the regard in which he held him, bestowed on him the title of Knight of the Golden Spurs, a title which he always afterwards bore.

Is it his meeting in London with Handel to which we owe the project that he conceived of a reform in the art of music; or ought we to bless the happy chance which, at Leghorn, brought him into contact with Kamero de Calzabigi, Counsellor of the Court of the Exchequer in the Low Countries? This Counsellor has ably translated and commented upon Metastasio. "The only poet of the heart," declares Jean-Jacques, "the only genius to move us by the charm of poetic and musical harmony," an opinion which to-day provokes our smiles as do so many other opinions of Rousseau.

"Orpheus and Eurydice" was the outcome of this collaboration. On the 5th of October, 1762, the Imperial Theatre at Vienna announced the first presentation of the opera, and the world, from that date, possessed one masterpiece the more. A revolution had taken place.

But Gluck desired the consecration of France, of Paris, already arbiter of Europe. The court of Vienna did not suffice him. At this period of his life, when most men desire only rest, nearing his sixtieth year, he longed only for battle. Without regret he began the journey, without fear of the fatigues and dangers which awaited him. Never had he been so valiant, so entirely sure of himself. He was at the height of his powers.

France, which several years later was to undertake the most terrible of revolutions, was very much averse to the one of which Gluck was the promoter. He had against him not only the public but

his musicians, who detested his severities and exactions.

The theatre at that time was in a state of anarchy, the actors reigned there as masters, and "nothing," says Lanjon, in his selected works, "was more difficult than to make them do what the act called for, or to get them all to take part in the action." "The orchestra of the Opera," observes the author of "The Picture of Paris," "is like an old coach drawn by bony horses, and driven by one deaf from his birth."

Gluck would never have attained the height of his ambition without the protection of the Dauphiness. An immense crowd pressed against the doors on the morning of the 19th of April; the Chief of Police held himself ready, for fear of threatened trouble. There was none. Enthusiasm was continuous after the second presentation.

"No one talks of anything else," wrote Marie Antoinette. "There exists in all minds an extraordinary fermentation. . . . People think about this and attack it as if it were an affair of religion."

"Paris," states one of the wisest of the biographers of Gluck, M. Desnoiretterres, "was entirely taken up, whether shocked or revolted, by this music that so far surpassed the productions which, until then, they had heard and applauded."

Each medal has its reverse. Those who stood for Italianism, for the light operas and Piccini, cried scandal. People made, à propos of Gluck, furious attacks on grossness, on slanders, on lies. Marmontel forgot his ordinary moderation and, putting himself at the head,

"broke," said Sainte-Beuve, "lances for and against everything; for Piccini, for Italian music, with unbounded ardor and with a passion in which the love of melody was less felt than the need of self-expression." Rollet, Suard, l'Abbé Arnaud ranged themselves on one side; on the other, La Harpe, Ginguené, d'Alembert. Ink flowed in rivers. The city and the court were aroused to an emotional frenzy. Happy times these, when one had the leisure to quarrel over such questions!

The wit and wisdom of Marie Antoinette saved the day. French taste carried it over the *ritournelles*, the *vocalises*, and the *mascarade*. Iphigenia, Alceste, Armide triumphed. . . . "If I am damned," said Gluck, "it will be for having written 'Armide.'" A man can never judge himself exactly. . . .

Gluck died suddenly at Vienna in his castle of Berchtholdsdorf. He had left France after the failure of "Echo and Narcissus," wounded in his pride, which had always been immense, and which increased with old age. His house still exists in Austria's capital; it is massive and handsome. He always left it gladly for his country residence, where, on fine days, having his piano carried onto the lawn, he amused himself by playing favorite passages from his operas. Numerous friends were about him. And among them, almost glass in hand, the inventor of the "continuous melody," the genial precursor of Berlioz and of Wagner, expired.

By PAUL ABBES.

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